

**Reflection:** First Sunday in Lent March 1, 2009

*There's a Hole in my Sidewalk* by Portia Nelson

Chapter 1.

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost...  
I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2.

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in this same place.  
But it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3.

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in... its a habit.  
But, my eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.

Chapter 4.

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

Chapter 5.

I walk down another street.

In one of those moments of serendipity, a friend sent me this poem on the morning that I opened my Bible to look at the readings for this week. Psalm 25 is a beautiful prayer: a prayer that combines praise of God, trust in God's goodness, a prayer to not be put to shame,

a longing for guidance, a plea for forgiveness, and an expression of confidence in the path we walk with God.

It struck me that the movement of the poem somewhat echoes the movement of the Psalm. Something is not quite right in life: we are experiencing trouble – we find ourselves in a deep hole, we feel persecuted and under fire. It's not our fault – it's those other guys, those people who cause us problems, those enemies who are just waiting to pounce on us. We're the good guys, God; get us out of this!

We get ourselves out of the situation, after much fumbling and grumbling, determined to follow a safer path. And yet, there we go, down the same path, and there's the hole again, and even though we see it, down we go. We find ourselves in the same situation, wondering how we got there. "God, how could you let this happen to me again? I'm waiting for you, God – come and rescue me!" Again, we manage to pull ourselves out of the negative situation, but nothing in us has really changed. We're still looking to blame others, or the universe, or God, for what has happened to us.

Again, we go down the same path, and again, we find ourselves in a bad situation; but this time, we start to ask ourselves, "What are we doing wrong, or not doing, that we keep ending up in the same condition?" We start looking at ourselves and thinking that maybe, just maybe, we're making some poor choices here. We call out to God for forgiveness, for help in changing this repetitive path we're on. We believe God can help us find a different path.

The next time we find ourselves heading in the same direction, we're able to avoid the pitfalls. And eventually, with God's Spirit leading us and holding us steady, we find ourselves on a different path altogether – a path that is healthier, holier, that takes us in the direction of what is good for us and for others. "All God's paths are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenants and decrees", writes the Psalmist. "God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way."

Ah, humility. Our favourite word, right? We had a conversation at Bible study a while back about what humility means. Humility doesn't mean that we have to grovel and tell everyone how worthless we are. Humility is related to the word "humus" – the rotting organic debris that enriches the soil. Humility simply reminds us that we are mortal, flawed human creatures, who make mistakes and need to own up to them. Humility is about taking responsibility for ourselves and acknowledging our flaws and limitations. In AA language, it would be about recognising the limits of our own ability to save ourselves, and calling on a Higher Power to help us do what we otherwise could not.

This is a path familiar to those who deal with addictions, but it is also a path familiar to anyone who deals with human beings in general, and even human institutions. A friend of mine who is in interim ministry noted how often we do this in the church: do the same things over and over and over again, and wonder why they don't produce different results! I can certainly see it in what I know of human relationships. I was talking to a friend going through a divorce about how we seem to be pre-programmed to repeat the same mistakes in relationships, and how hard it is to create new patterns and new ways of being. On a much larger scale, we look at the way our financial institutions have tried to solve the economic crisis caused by conspicuous consumption and ridiculous levels of borrowing and lending. Their solution? Make more credit available, and give more money to the institutions that have already shown

themselves to be fiscally irresponsible! We look at these patterns, and we shake our heads in disbelief – yet if we are humble, we can see the same pattern in ourselves. There’s a hole in the sidewalk, and we keep falling in, and wondering how we got there!

Lent has traditionally been a time of reflection. In the ancient church it was the time to prepare new Christian converts for baptism: a time of mentoring, teaching, prayer, and soul-searching. It is a time of confession and repentance: “God, I know where I went wrong. I’m sorry, and I want to try again. Hold me up with your love, and show me a better path.” That is the prayer of the Lenten heart.

Baptism is a powerful symbol of new life. For Jesus, it was a radical shift from the conventional life of a 1<sup>st</sup> century craftsman, into a life possessed by the mission given him by the Holy Spirit – to proclaim the coming of the reign of God. Lent is a really good time to focus on our baptism, and as one of the great Reformers said, “Believe on your baptism.” Believe that new life is possible, that we don’t have to keep walking down the same sidewalk and falling in the same holes. Martin Luther taught that baptism is a spiritual event that takes place not just on the day of one’s baptism but every day throughout life – that each day the Holy Spirit moves in us to cleanse us of what separates us from God and to renew us once more. If we take our baptism seriously, that means we can always start fresh; that there is a new and godly path for us to walk.

In Luther’s *Large Catechism*, he writes: “No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no work on earth can acquire.”

Humility – recognising how we ended up in the hole; repentance – “God, I messed up and I don’t want to end up in that hole again!”; confidence in the saving and transforming love of God acted out for us in baptism – “You have a new path for me, God. Show me the way, and help me stay on it!” Discerning the will of God is not always easy, but I can say with a fair bit of confidence, that you’ll find yourself in a better place spiritually than you were before you sought God’s will – before you recognized the need for a different path.

May God bless your Lenten journey. Amen.